

Wacław Rapak

Jagiellonian University

## CRAFTING BETWEEN CODES – HENRI MICHAUX

Taking as a point of departure modernism in the broadest sense<sup>1</sup> and assuming as a literary and artistic frame the considerations presented here, I propose that the artistic and literary phenomenon of synthesis in the arts – as well as affinities between the arts – assumes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century a markedly diverse character that clearly differs from traditional forms. It was then that the arts began to undergo differentiation, a process still underway today, whose sole esthetic and artistic criterion seems to have been, and remains, originality. At the same time, synthesis (affinity) came to be used more and more often in a sense approaching syncretism – modernity/modernism(s) – or even eclecticism – post-modernism in a broad sense. It is well known that France and French-speaking European countries (especially Belgium and Switzerland), the terrain explored here, played a particularly crucial role in searching for new ways and means of expression. A list of key phenomena and emblematic personages could hardly begin other than with Stéphane Mallarmé, Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, Victor Segalen, Paul Claudel<sup>2</sup> and Jean Cocteau.<sup>3</sup> These are obviously but a few names among a great many in this epoch, by which I mean the twentieth century, an era

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the entry in *Słownik terminów literackich*, edited by J. Sławiński.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to an unpublished dissertation by a doctoral candidate of mine, Agnieszka Kuraś-Kukuryk, who carried out a thorough review of important phenomena and forms involving the coexistence of written and graphic codes in the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Successfully defended in 2013, the work is entitled “Pictography as the Creative Coexistence of Written and Graphic Codes in the French Literature of the First Thirty Years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.”

<sup>3</sup> I consider the most recent work on this subject to be Małgorzata Zawadzka’s doctoral thesis, entitled “Jean Cocteau: le poète face aux arts plastiques.” In mentioning this and the previous thesis, my point is also to show that the problem of the coexistence of different codes in the works of modern/modernist writers and artists is of interest to a growing number of junior scholars.

once pithily described as an age of painting poets and writing painters, of modern creators moving in constantly changing directions. “Openness” in a categorical sense<sup>4</sup> is not just an indicator of what traditionally – for lack of a better term – still goes by the name of synthesis or affinity of the arts. In this historical and artistic context, co-implication of codes leads to new types or kinds of symbolicity, each original in its own way. Undoubtedly, Mallarméan typography opens the (r)evolutionary road to changes and transformations, each of which in its own way lays the foundation for new principles for both creating and evaluating new types of work. Liberated from generic and categorical limitations, poetic language violates the principle of homogeneity and continuity, the best example of which is, of course, the collage as praxis and nucleus of a new poetics. The intertwining, the co-existence and multilevel simultaneity of words and images,<sup>5</sup> the textbook examples of which today are calligrammes, ideograms, graphisms, pictographs and visual poetry, are closely connected with new forms of materiality and spatiality characteristic of modern (modernist) works and, incidentally, of postmodern works; for such (post)modern works, the label “literary” or “poetic” no longer suffices. The problem is widely recognised as exceptionally serious and far-reaching. In this brief introduction I will limit myself to observing that from a semiotic perspective, the aforementioned co-implication of codes – the written code and the graphic or artistic one – and the symbolicity closely connected with it require passing from the category of intertextuality towards one of intersemioticity and/or intermediality<sup>6</sup> when dealing with both the genesis and reception of a work.

Assuming the background briefly outlined above as representative of the tendencies dominant in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I can confidently assert that a unique position should be accorded to Henri Michaux, a poet I have long been occupied with, one who shares with the aforementioned artists and writers if not the year of his birth (1899) then certainly the year of his literary debut (1922). This, as is generally known, was the moment when Dadaism transformed into surrealism – not least due to the artistic activity of André Breton. Within two years, the movement would earn its citizenship and come to exist fully not only in the consciousness of French readers and

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> saw the beginning of a process which brought philosophy and poetry or, more broadly, literature closer together. Like Nietzsche and Bergson, philosophers resorted to poetic means of expression. The list includes St. Mallarmé, Kafka, Michaux, Pessoa and Camus – “philosophising” writers. See Deleuze & Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Editions de Minuit, 1991, Critique series.

<sup>5</sup> And so, for example, in cubist poetry it assumes the form of both simultaneity and juxtaposition.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Chmielecki, *Estetyka intermedialności*, Kraków: Rabid, 2008.

French criticism. In the case of Henri Michaux, it is telling that during his debut period, which critics term his “green period”<sup>7</sup> (and during which he expresses his far-reaching objections to Breton’s surrealist doctrine and starts developing his own version of surrealist techniques), he begins to take an interest in painting, with painters close to the inchoate poetics of surrealism playing an important role. It is highly significant that in the case of Michaux, both the need to write and the need to paint/draw seem to have been inspired almost entirely from without. First the need to write, which, as the poet himself says, arose as a result of reading Lautréamont and his *Les Chants de Maldoror*.<sup>8</sup> In “Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d’existence”<sup>9</sup> (“Some Information About Fifty-Nine Years of Existence”), his poetic autobiography, which in the past I have referred to as paradoxical, Michaux evokes *ex post*, from a perspective of nearly forty years, the moment of his “painterly” birth. He does so as follows:

1925 Klee puis Ernst, Chirico... Extrême surprise. Jusque-là, il haïssait la peinture et le fait même de peindre, “comme s’il n’y avait pas encore assez de réalité, de cette abominable réalité – pensait-il. Encore vouloir la Ryter, y revenir.” (*Œuvres complètes* I, p. CXXII)

This oft-quoted fragment is quite telling. It is a young poet’s strongly worded expression of hostility towards painting and painters alike, whom he explicitly accuses of wanting to “repeat,” “come back” to “awful reality.” In a private letter written two years before this autobiography was published, Michaux calls painters, whom he had previously hated, “les auxiliaires bénévoles de l’encombrante réalité et de ses apparences qui ne sont que trop apparentes et couvrantes.” It is worth adding here the telling fact that in Michaux’s opinion, “Les cubistes même ne les avaient jamias dépassées, tout au contraire.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The term was proposed by Jean-Baptiste Baronian and borrowed from the name of the Belgian periodical *Le disque vert*, which Michaux worked for as a young man starting in 1922. See J.-B. Baronian, “La période verte,” *Magazine Littéraire*, no. 220, 1985, pp. 21–22).

<sup>8</sup> “1922. Brussels. Reads [Lautréamont’s] *Maldoror*. Shock... which soon brings on the long-forgotten need to write.” In *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology, 1927–1984*, transl. David Ball, University of California Press, 1994, p. xxvii.

<sup>9</sup> H. Michaux, “Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d’existence,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, pp. CXXIX–CXXXV. This text was originally published in 1959 in a monograph on Henri Michaux by Robert Bréchon. It also opens the special issue of *Cahiers de l’Herne* devoted to Michaux and the monograph on Michaux by Jean-Michel Maulpoix.

<sup>10</sup> This in a letter to Patrick Waldberg dated May 30, 1956. I am quoting from R. Bellour, *Lire Michaux*, Gallimard, Paris, tel series, p. 247, footnote 3.

While naming the type of painting to which the poet expresses his radical opposition obviously poses no difficulties, I should warn against making simple associations based on the names and artistic context presented above that unequivocally connect Michaux's attempts at painting with surrealism or any of the avant-garde movements or trends of his day. The truth, however, as the above quotations show, is that Michaux himself does not deny being inspired by the painters he mentions. However, today we are actually quite well aware that painterly inspirations were not signposts indicating which road he could or should have taken, but rather an opening of the road to numerous, previously unimaginable possibilities. In the aforementioned letter of 1956 the poet writes: "Enfin par Ernst et Klee, je voyais quelque chose comme le dessous des cartes. C'était une voie, un espoir" (qtd. in Bellour 247). The metaphor resorted to by Michaux gives us to understand that there is an escape route from "awful reality," that painting or drawing, by avoiding both the principles of *mimesis* and the requirements of formal mimetism,<sup>11</sup> give the artist an incredible freedom of movement in searching for what could be called the other, undiscovered side of reality. Experiencing, exploring, "painting-drawing" this other side enables the artist to liberate himself from the snares of appearances that conceal the true reality, an inverse of the reality perceived at first glance.

Michaux's first attempts at painting date to 1925–1927. Few in number and marked by a young artist's hesitancy, these works indicate what direction this painting so hostile to "awful reality" would take. It also indicates, first and foremost, how inadequate the term "painting" is for this type of work, a term still being used by critics, who are forced to resort to various kinds of clarifications or even to redefine the term itself. His first watercolors, pen and ink drawings and oil paintings set Michaux in opposition to realism and figurativism, if these terms are taken to imply an intention to imitate external reality in any way.

In seeking to understand what attitude Michaux, now a poet-painter, was developing towards external reality, his travel journal *Ecuador*<sup>12</sup> is well worth consulting. In an article appearing in *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1929, right after the journal was published, Michaux tellingly warns future readers and draws their attention to the fact that the journal does not contain, for example, a discussion of the Panama Canal; instead:

---

<sup>11</sup> In his second debut text, "Chronique de l'aiguilleur," Michaux speaks of "l'image mimique" ("the mimetic image"), an extension and development of the visual image (cf. H. Michaux, "Chronique de l'aiguilleur" in Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, pp. 9–15, R. Bellour, *Lire Michaux*, Gallimard, Paris, tel series, pp. 26, 248–249).

<sup>12</sup> There is a Polish translation of this journal bearing the needlessly Polonised title *Ekwador*.

[...] il lui arrive de parler d'une mouche. Il ne s'est jamais préoccupé d'être juste et impartiale envers les choses, il s'est seulement préoccupé de l'être envers ses impressions.<sup>13</sup>

As the author of the Ecuador travel journal makes clear, the crucial point – which certainly holds in general for a large part of the work – is that he applies the requirement of “justesse” and “impartialité” primarily to “ses impressions.” And this, if you will, suggests in the proposed context an approach to external reality dominated not by objectivism vis-à-vis an independently existing reality but by subjectivism. To put it in language akin to Michaux's, it could probably be said that the external undergoes internalization in a way that is natural for this type of perception. Furthermore, the mechanism at work here is constantly changing, and the principle behind these changes is always the requirement that the manner of perception be adapted to the object perceived. At the highest level of generalization, it could be said that in the case of Michaux, “impressionisme” is characterised by a special directness, a certain immediacy entirely his own, behind which stands the lack of mediacy understood as the lack of mediation. But what is most important here, and what seems to me to distinguish Michaux's distinctive kind of “impressionisme” from the canonical definition of lyric poetry, is firstly the special attitude of the subject, of the (to use a somewhat clunky dictionary definition) subject of creative activity, an attitude characteristic of the work in question – in short: the nature of his unique kind of subjectivism. The second distinctive feature is the status and nature of the objects of internalization, of which his contrasting the Panama Canal with a fly is clearly emblematic.

However, this internalization, associated as it is with subjectivism, also manifests perhaps unsurprisingly a paradoxicality of its own. I return once again to the example from *Ecuador*, where the travelling poet says the following “Jolis gestes fort effacés: les restes d'un/ très beau parc./ Cela me plaît et entre en moi” (*Œuvres complètes* I, 187). In the first place, as has already been shown, in Michaux's work this internalization is hardly ever<sup>14</sup> a direct representation of reality.<sup>15</sup> In the second, only part of this work can be interpreted as poetic expression in the traditional sense. However, what dominates, what is of prime importance both for representation, or rather re-presentation, of reality and for expression in the general sense, is the experience of reality rather than the “simple” description or expression of reality. The desire for

---

<sup>13</sup> H. Michaux, “Vient de paraître” in *NFR*, August 1, 1929, qtd. in “Note sur le texte” in H. Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 1085.

<sup>14</sup> This qualification is a matter of scholarly caution, bearing in mind the size of the work.

<sup>15</sup> “Ne plus imiter la nature. La signifier./ Par des traits, des élans./ Ascèse de l'immédiat, de l'éclair,” in H. Michaux, *Idéogrammes en Chine*, Fata Morgana, 1975, unpaginated.

knowledge entails readiness to be put to the test, to submit to the conditions and requirements of what Michaux called in the title of one of his most important collections “The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the Countless Minor Ones.”<sup>16</sup> Reading this enormous, sprawling work allows one to conclude that these ordeals, both minor and major, assume the form of ordeals as trials, ordeals as experiments, and finally, ordeals as experiences and resultant impressions. As Jean-Pierre Martin writes of Michaux’s early work, the poet’s true passion is neither the crafting of stories nor the “la poésie des poètes.” “C’est plutôt ce qui pourrait se jouer entre philosophie, littérature et science, une pensée singulière, expérimentale à laquelle une forme de littérature permettrait d’accéder” (“Avertissement,” *Henri Michaux* 95). In this regard, writing and painting turn out to have a great deal in common. At the highest level of generalization, it can be asserted that literature and painting often enter into a direct alliance that induces an intuitive impression of intercourse with an artistic unity, with a work “written” using two different means of artistic expression. This dual “writing,” this “writing-writing” and “writing-painting/drawing” coexists, although in principle the coexistence rarely involves simultaneity. I should add up front that in essence it is difficult in general to speak of a peaceful coexistence in the case of Michaux. However, despite the differences, and despite the far-reaching autonomy, “writing-writing” and “writing-painting/drawing” have a few basic points in common.

The most important point seems to me to be the fact that the aspiration which, for lack of a better word, I continue to call the synthesis of the arts, possesses a profound existential dimension. Jean-Pierre Martin, Michaux’s biographer, characterises this aspect succinctly and persuasively:

Ce qui rend cette vie passionnante, ce n’est pas seulement qu’elle ait été une vie de peintre et d’écrivain, ou bien la cohérence profonde [...] entre l’itinéraire biographique et l’itinéraire esthétique. C’est que l’invention continuée de l’œuvre est solidaire de l’invention d’une vie; que le voyage de cette vie semble nous raconter une histoire de ruptures, de fuites et de désencombres, une histoire qui ne veut pas regarder en arrière. Le contraire d’un destin. (Martin 19)<sup>17</sup>

It should be pointed out that this “solidaire de l’invention d’une vie” dual “writing” is characterised to a high degree by the abovementioned “impressionisme,” which in turn is connected, once again, with directness and immediacy. Interpreted in this way, Michaux’s “impressionisme” can thus be connected with the “poetics of experience” conceptualised by Ryszard Nycz.

<sup>16</sup> A collection of texts by Michaux published in 1966 and entitled *Les grandes épreuves de l’esprit et les innombrables petites*. This is Michaux’s last book to be termed “drug-induced” by critics (“livres de la drogue”).

<sup>17</sup> See also R. Bréchon, *Henri Michaux. La poésie comme destin*, p. 305.

In his most recent book the Kraków scholar writes, among other things, that modernity in the broad sense, with which he has long been occupied, makes clear the need for:

[...] reinterpretation of the category of directness, the manner of connecting the sensual-physical with the intellectual-discursive, and also – perhaps primarily – the search for a non-dualistic way in which language may approach reality. (Nycz 140)<sup>18</sup>

I would add only that in her deliberations on the subject of modernity, which she too understands and conceives in a broad sense, Agata Bielik-Robson speaks of the internalization of *cogito* (28)<sup>19</sup> and the “sensualization of the spirit” (385).<sup>20</sup>

In Michaux’s work, the aesthetic dimension seems to be of secondary importance, which does not mean that it plays a secondary role in his aspiration to gain experience of a primarily existential nature with a strong ethical undertone. Unusually personal, this dual “writing” involves approaching a piece of paper or a canvas with the awareness that these two means of expression, these two types of “writing” are independent of one another. In the afterword to his collection *Mouvements*, a representative example of drawings and poetry coexisting, Michaux even says that drawings have in his case turned out to be a liberation from words, “ces collants partenaires” and as “libérateurs” they have given rise to “nouveau langage, tournant le dos au verbal.”<sup>21</sup> However, the intuitively graspable unity undoubtedly exists in the rhythm of words and the rhythm of visual signs which comprise the semiotic whole that Michaux’s drawings, watercolours and graphisms in essence turn out to be. Rhythm as a concept and an aesthetic category, the equivalent of style as Roland Barthes conceives it in *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*,<sup>22</sup> forms a conceptual basis for con-

<sup>18</sup> Trans. Joshua Crone.

<sup>19</sup> “Cogito gains a new dimension, a bottomless interior. Exploring this abyss will henceforth become a recurring motif in philosophical inquiry – from romanticism, with its Novalis-inspired “thinking inwards” (*Denken nach Innen*) to the “deep” psychoanalysis of Freud and his students.” A. Bielik-Robson, *Na drugim brzegu nihilizmu*, IFiS PAN, 1997, p. 28 (trans. Joshua Crone); see especially the chapter “Kartezjanizm w kryzysie,” p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> “Whereas idealistic hermeneutics worked by spiritualising sensuality, reductive hermeneutics seeks to reverse this direction and sensualise the spirit. This *sensualization* of the spirit should be understood in two ways: it first exposes the primarily impulse-driven, materialistic genealogy of the spirit, which then leads to a full awareness of what the spirit truly is.” A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Universitas 2000, p. 385 (trans. Joshua Crone).

<sup>21</sup> H. Michaux, *Mouvements*, Editions Gallimard, 1951, republished in 1982, unpaginated. See also the full text of this afterword in H. Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, edition prepared by R. Bellour and Ysé Tran, Editions Gallimard, 2001, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series, vol. II, p. 599.

<sup>22</sup> See also Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, Editions Gallimard, [1959] 1986 edition, p. 279 etc.



siderations that, in my opinion, make it possible not only to grasp the unity mentioned above, but also to identify features that would allow us both to define the stylistic dominant of the complete works of the author of *Un certain Plume*, and at the same time to secure Michaux's position in the twentieth century tradition of modernity.

A hermeneutic interpretation in the broad sense would serve here, in connection with Michaux, as a counterpart to the poet and painter's attitude concealed behind this interpretation. From the outset of his artistic journey, Michaux strove, not only for artistic purposes, to work out a method that harmonised with him internally, a method whose oft formulated goal was to embrace, to grasp from within, as it were, external and internal reality in the ambiguous connections to an essentially unknowable and inexplicable world. One of the most general ways of defining this attitude is in terms of "ontological alienation," a term used by Robert Bréchon, author of *Henri Michaux. La poésie comme destin* to describe the poet's entire work (20). Bréchon maintains that "dans le 'voyage' quotidien" from one activity to the other, from one skill to the other, from linguistic genius to artistic talent, Henri Michaux best experiences that exploration and conquest of the self that enables us to become who we are, a process that can ultimately be reduced to ethics, to what the sages of antiquity called "la vie bonne" ("the good life") (Bréchon 8).

This outline of a problem that I have only begun to introduce and that can hardly be resolved in a short article is presented in synthetic form in the words of another eminent expert on Michaux, Raymond Bellour, whose monograph contains the following statement:

Ce que Michaux trouve dans la peinture, c'est une liberté. Il l'a répété mille fois, c'est échapper aux mots et laisser vivre en soi une voix simple et primitive qui ne doit rien à cette obligation du sens qui naît dès le moment qu'on parle. Merleau-Ponty le disait, le peintre a l'innocence, il est l'homme du plus grand privilège car à la fois il peut tout dire et rester silencieux. Michaux a exercé ce privilège jusqu'au bout, avec l'ivresse qui échappe à une emprise et s'abandonne à soi. On ne peut rêver d'un plus beau dialogue. Car le peintre et l'écrivain, aujourd'hui, en Michaux, se précisent l'un l'autre chaque jour un peu plus. La double énigme du langage et des voix du silence s'éclaire de façon admirable [...] (Henri Michaux 280–281)

To these closing, though not conclusive, remarks it should certainly be added that "Michaux the painter and writer" also made films and demonstrated a decided interest in music, composing what could be called musical experiments. He could therefore be considered the epitome of modern intermediality.

*Translated by Joshua Crone*



## Bibliography

- Baronian, Jean-Baptiste. "La période verte." *Magazine Littéraire* no. 220 (1985).
- Bellour, Raymond. *Henri Michaux*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris: Gallimard, 1986 [1965], folio/essais series.
- . *Lire Michaux*. Paris: Gallimard, 2011.
- Bielik-Robson, Agata. *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*. Kraków: Universitas, 2000.
- . *Na drugim brzegu nihilizmu*. IFiS PAN, 1997.
- Bréchon, Robert. *Henri Michaux. La poésie comme destin*. Croissy-Beaubourg: Editions Aden, 2005.
- Chmielecki, Konrad. *Estetyka intermedialności*. Kraków: Rabid, 2008.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1986 [1959].
- Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari. *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991.
- Martin, Jean-Pierre. *Henri Michaux*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003.
- Michaux, Henri. *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology, 1927–1984*. Selected, translated and presented by David Ball. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994.
- . *Idéogrammes en Chine*. Saint Clément de riviére: Fata Morgana, 1975.
- . *Mouvements*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.
- . *Œuvres complètes*. R. Bellour, Y. Tran (éditeurs). Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol. I, 1998; vol. II, 2001; vol. III, 2004.
- Nycz, Ryszard. *Poetyka doświadczenia: teoria – nowoczesność – literatura*. Warszawa: IBL Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2012.
- Sławiński, Janusz (ed.). *Słownik terminów literackich*. Wyd. III popr. Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków: Ossolineum, 1998.